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SUBJECT: DFM KARASIN ON GEORGIA, N-K, MOLDOVA AND UKRAINE:
ACCUSES TBILISI OF ESCALATING TENSIONS

Classified By: Ambassador John Beyrle for reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

SUMMARY

1. (C) In a November 26 meeting with Ambassador Beyrle, DFM Karasin sounded alarm bells about Saakashvili's "irresponsible" escalation of Russia-Georgia tensions, warning the situation could lead to renewed conflict, partly because the U.S. is sending signals of support -- and, he claimed, weapons -- to Georgia. The Ambassador stated the U.S. does not share this assessment and the misalignment of perceptions between Russia and Georgia needs to be fixed lest it lead to miscalculations. He also stated that U.S.-Georgian military ties are focused on the upcoming Afghanistan deployment and the U.S. is not rearming Georgia. Karasin offered a modestly upbeat assessment of on-going Azerbaijan-Armenia talks, but does not expect marked progress until Armenia's rapprochement with Turkey is ratified. He reiterated Russian support for the 5-plus-2 process in Moldova, but laid down markers regarding Russia's insistence on Moldovan neutrality and the need to respect previous international statements on Transnistria's status. Karasin applauded the recent Putin-Tymoshenko meeting, but refused to speculate on the upcoming presidential election in Ukraine. End summary.

GEORGIA

2. (C) During a November 26 meeting, Ambassador Beyrle and Deputy Foreign Minister Grigory Karasin discussed Russia's relations with Georgia and Russian views on other frozen conflicts and Ukraine. Following an exchange on detainee questions (septel), the Ambassador urged Russia and the breakaway regions to drop their insistence on a non-use of force (NUF) agreement as a precondition to engaging on other questions in the Geneva process. The Ambassador said Georgia is observing NUF under the terms of the cease-fire from last August and it will never sign an agreement with regions it considers are still part of its territory.

3. (C) Karasin acknowledged the GOG would not sign an NUF because of the status issue. But he claimed Georgia was not abiding by the Sarkozy-Medvedev agreements. According to Russian military experts, Karasin said, the Georgian military has returned to 2008 levels of activity ("including drones on overflights") and the escalation of tension is repeating itself. "As reasonable people, we want to make sure a new conflict doesn't break out." Saakashvili, he said, is ignoring his country's economic and political problems and behaving like a demagogue, portraying himself as a democratic leader struggling against Russia. If Saakashvili feels support from Washington in the form of arms, he will claim

the world is behind him: "it is dangerous to give an irresponsible politician a second wind." Russian military experts, Karasin continued, are analyzing the situation and, while the border areas are calm, there is a growing hysteria within Georgia to retake the lost territories. If Saakashvili continues on this path, we'll have a repeat of August, 2008, he claimed.

¶4. (C) The Ambassador responded that the U.S. does not see the level of Georgian military activity described by Karasin and there is clearly a need for better communication because such different perceptions could cause serious miscalculations. He reiterated that the U.S. mil-mil focus with Georgia is on preparing for the Georgian deployment to Afghanistan. "We are not rearming Georgia."

¶5. (C) On the Perevi border post, Karasin claimed the Russian encampment is occupied by only four border guards and there are an additional 15-20 soldiers in an adjacent position on the South Ossetian side of the administrative boundary. Russia will leave the post and wants EU monitors to take up the positions lest the Georgians take over and make exaggerated propaganda claims about the hand-over. In terms of timing, he said "my best guess" is that the transfer would happen in the Spring.

NAGORNO-KARABAKH

¶6. (C) Despite the slow progress on Nagorno-Karabakh, Karasin said he believes the process is going well as evidenced by

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the frequency of meetings between the Azerbaijani and Armenian presidents, most recently in Munich. He was pleased these meetings are focusing on tough issues such as the referendum and the width of the Lachin corridor. He noted the next meeting could occur at the FM level on the margins of the OSCE ministerial in Athens together with the foreign ministers of the three Minsk Group co-chairs, though he said "I'm not convinced that's the appropriate format." The Ambassador agreed that presidential meetings offer the best chance for progress, including those organized by Russian president Medvedev. Karasin said no "2-plus-1" meetings are currently slated, but something could happen in the spring in conjunction with another regional meeting.

¶7. (C) Karasin said progress now depends on how fast Ankara and Yerevan can ratify their agreement on normalizing relations. He said the Turkish government should ratify the accord in January, otherwise public opinion in Armenia and its diaspora will harden and make it impossible for Sargsian to move forward. Once the Turkish-Armenian agreement is completed, Karasin said the next challenge will be to find a way for Aliyev to show that he is delivering a "win" for his side and buttressing his image as a leader who regained lost territory and unified the Azeri people.

MOLDOVA

¶8. (C) Karasin said Russia wants instability in Moldova to end quickly, but he was skeptical the December 10 elections would accomplish that given the personal antagonism between Lupu and Voronin. If that election doesn't succeed in naming a president, the instability will continue; the Communist Party believes it will benefit if a new parliamentary election is called, but Karasin was skeptical, noting the perilous state of the economy throughout the country.

¶9. (C) Russia, Karasin stated, believes the Transnistria issue needs to be resolved on the basis of the 5-plus-2 process and he articulated three Russian red-lines:

--Moldova's sovereignty must be safeguarded, in particular the EU must do more to quash any incipient attempts by

Romania to call Moldova's status into question.

--The international community must serve as guarantors of Moldova's constitutionally mandated neutrality.

--The Transnistria issue should proceed on the basis of previous international agreements (i.e. OSCE declarations), starting in 1994.

¶10. (C) The Ambassador noted the U.S. would take exception with the second point since every country should have the choice of choosing its own course and shouldn't be locked into neutrality by outside forces. He also noted there is concern about Smirnov's recent talk about international recognition of Transnistria. Karasin responded that, while there are tensions and dangers in Transnistria, it has nothing in common with Georgia and Russia is not contemplating recognition, as happened with South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

UKRAINE

¶11. (C) Karasin was upbeat on Russian-Ukrainian relations, heralding the recent Yalta Putin-Tymoshenko meeting as proof that constructive business is continuing despite tension at the presidential level. He noted contacts at the MFA level are also flourishing. He declined to speculate on the election other than to predict Yanukovich and Tymoshenko are the favorites to make it through to a run-off, but the unpredictability of alliances and endorsements make it impossible to forecast the ultimate winner. Despite speculation that Yushchenko and/or the Russian side might engineer a "January surprise" to influence the outcome, Karasin said he does not expect anything that will destabilize bilateral relations in the final stretch of the campaign.

COMMENT

¶12. (C) Karasin is among our more reasonable and moderate

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high-level contacts on Georgia, and thus his "re-arming" concerns probably reflect even more alarmist perceptions among the Russian military and security services. The latter have a well-known history of coming to treat their own exaggerations and paranoia as fact, if left unchallenged. While no level of transparency will ever be sufficient for them on this emotional subject, the larger risk is underdoing it. We recommend allotting enough time for a healthy exchange on our military cooperation with Georgia during the December 15-17 Joint Staff Talks, if not before. End comment.
Beyrle